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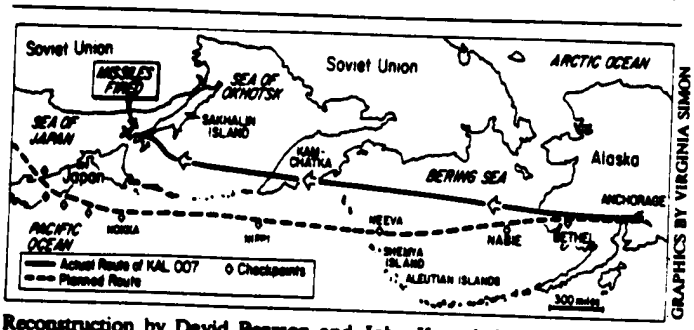
JOURNEY INTO DOUBT

New Pieces in The Puzzle of Flight 007

DAVID PEARSON AND JOHN KEPPEL

A year has passed since *The Nation*'s special issue on the downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007, and the most important questions about the tragedy remain unanswered. How did the airliner get to the spot over Soviet territory where it was shot down on the night of August 31, 1983? What was it doing there? What did the U.S. government know and when did it know it?



Reconstruction by David Pearson and John Keppel, based on U.S. and Japanese radar data and other material in the public record.

In recent months, however, new information has come out that sheds some light on these issues. Most notably, the Japanese government has made public radar data that directly contradict the Reagan Administration's official version of events leading to the downing. Other material already in the public record—including the tape of the final transmission recorded by Tokyo air traffic controllers thirty-eight seconds after the airliner was hit by one or more Soviet missiles—has also been subjected to state-of-the-art technical analysis, the results of which are reported here for the first time. If the new evidence is accurate, the following can now be demonstrated:

§ That K.A.L. 007 changed altitude and speed as it entered and flew over Sakhalin Island in Soviet territory, without reporting to Tokyo air traffic controllers as required under international aviation procedures.

§ That near the end of the flight, Tokyo air traffic controllers received reports, ostensibly from K.A.L. 007, about an altitude change by the airliner that never took place.

§ That the airliner changed course over Sakhalin Island without reporting to Tokyo air traffic controllers.

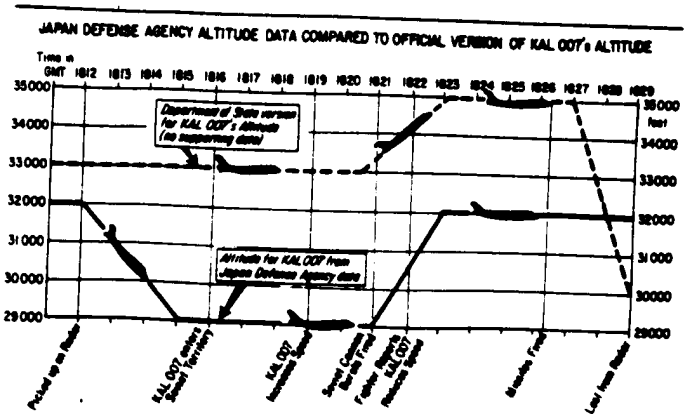
§ That early in the flight K.A.L. 007 must have made an unreported turn to the north toward Soviet territory.

§ That the tape of the airliner's final radio transmission says something quite different from what the International Civil Aviation Organization (I.C.A.O.) claimed it said in a report that U.S. officials have heralded as "authoritative."

The new information, some of which has received extensive attention in the international press, has disturbing implications. It shows that the crew of the Korean airliner could not have accidentally or unknowingly flown its dangerous course over the Soviet Union's Kamchatka Peninsula and Sakhalin Island. This means that the official U.S. government and I.C.A.O. explanations of the tragedy—that K.A.L. 007 innocently flew over Soviet territory as a result of some navigational error—are not credible. It also strongly suggests that the Reagan Administration, which had its own information and must have had access to that of the Japanese military at the time of the incident or soon afterward, has covered up vital evidence about the downing.

The New Japanese Radar Data

The most dramatic advance in the case during the past year was the release of altitude and speed data from the Japan Defense Agency (J.D.A.). These data show that at 1815 Greenwich mean time (G.M.T.), almost precisely the moment K.A.L. 007 entered Soviet territory over Sakhalin, it descended from an altitude of approximately 32,000 feet to approximately 29,000 feet. The airliner was supposed to have been flying at its assigned altitude of 33,000 feet. It increased speed as a Soviet SU-15 interceptor aircraft closed in. After the Soviet pilot fired tracer rounds as a warning signal, the airliner ascended 3,000 feet, and in the final moments before the fatal missile was fired, the J.D.A. data suggest, the pilot of K.A.L. 007 once again increased speed (see chart below).



SOURCES: Japan Defense Agency, U.S. State Department

David Pearson, a doctoral candidate in sociology at Yale University, is working on a book about K.A.L. 007. John Keppel, a retired U.S. Foreign Service officer with two tours of duty in Moscow, took part in the abortive cover-up of the U-2 flight in 1960. The authors acknowledge the role of the Fund for Constitutional Government in financing the ongoing acoustic study of the communications tapes.

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